

1) An ecosystem maintained by fire

This site contains pine flatwoods, as well as scrubby flatwoods ecosystems, the latter considered a transitional habitat between pine flatwoods and true scrub. The pine flatwoods in front of you consists of an overstory of slash pine and an understory dominated by saw palmetto; in scrubby flatwoods the understory includes small 'scrub' oaks. The vegetation is adapted to well-drained, sandy, nutrient poor soils, and is dependent on periodic fire. Fire allows for accumulated dead vegetation to be burned up and the nutrients returned to the soil for living plants to use. It also opens up the forest floor to allow groundcover to grow and to create the open sandy patches that some wildlife need. Some plants are dependent on fire to release their seeds. The dead trees, or **snags** that stand before you are remnants of a wildfire that occurred here in 2004. Wildfire, naturally caused by lightning, is being replaced by prescribed burning in which land managers deliberately burn the forest to achieve a more natural and much safer burning pattern.



2) Observation Tower

By getting a bird's eye view, you can see the pine canopy and understory of palmetto and scrub oaks. Although the snags that you see aren't living trees, they serve an important role in the ecosystem by providing nesting holes for woodpeckers and other cavity nesting birds. Do you see any holes? Look and listen carefully, you just might see a woodpecker flying from tree to tree, feeding on the bark, or calling or drumming on a tree trunk.



3) Winged / Shining Sumac - *Rhus copallinum* -

Although not an important food item for the FL Scrub-Jay, this plant provides food for other wildlife. The nectar and pollen of the flowers attract many kinds of insects, especially wasps, flies, and bees. The leaves are a food source for the caterpillars of several species of moths. Songbirds eat the fruits and help distribute the seeds. Both rabbits and deer browse on the foliage, stems, and bark. Being deciduous, it provides beautiful fall foliage and is a good choice for native plant landscaping.



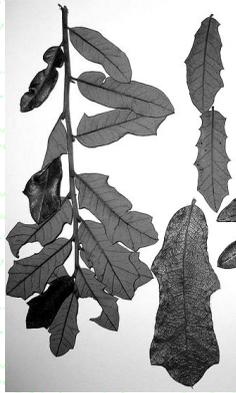
4) Sand Pine - *Pinus clausa* -

At this point you can see the species of pine tree characteristic of true scrub, the sand pine. Sand pines are directly dependent on fire as they have **serotinous** cones, which means the heat of fire is required to open up the cones to allow for the release of seeds. These trees provide cover and nesting sites for songbirds, woodpeckers, and squirrels, and FL Scrub-Jays have been known to nest in their branches. Birds of prey often perch in these trees to gain a vantage point to stalk mammals on the ground that feed on their seeds.



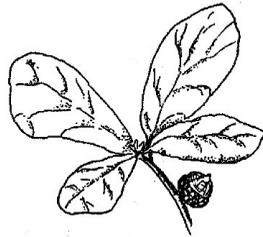
5) Dwarf Live Oak - *Quercus minima* -

Although not typically classified as a member of the "scrub" oaks, the Dwarf Live Oak is a small, evergreen, multi-stemmed shrub that may reach up to 2 meters tall. Oaks are typically thought of as overstory trees, but oaks in these ecosystems are short in stature and comprise parts of the understory. Their height is an adaptation to living in a hot, open environment where they are exposed to the elements.



6) Myrtle Oak - *Quercusmyrtifolia* -

Myrtle oak is, however, a true scrub oak. These shrubs are also short in stature, but have additional adaptations for dry and sometimes harsh conditions. Their thick, waxy leaves help retain water. Myrtle oak leaves are **revolute**, or turned downwards, to allow for even greater water retention. Scrub oaks are extremely important for the threatened FL Scrub-Jay. Not only are they important cover and nesting shrubs, but these birds depend on them for food. As omnivores, Jays eat insects, berries, and other food items, but depends on acorns in winter months when insects are scarce.



7) FL Scrub-Jay - *Aphelocoma coerulescens* -

Is a threatened species that is **endemic** to peninsular FL, meaning it is found in this state and nowhere else in the world. Within FL, it is only found in certain endemic habitats, including true scrub and scrubby flatwoods that occur along the backbone and coasts of the state. Both of these habitats are rapidly disappearing due to development and conversion to agriculture.



Scrub-Jays are monogamous and have great family values. As "cooperative breeders", the young from previous years will help with the raising of their younger siblings. They might help feed their younger brothers or sisters or help with guard duties by acting as sentinels to protect against predators and potential territory intruders. The Scrub-Jays that inhabit this site are most frequently found in the eastern portion, but are often seen perching on oaks or on the lower branches of snags around this location. Look around; do you see any of these birds? Listen for their call or for the "hiccup" call that only the female bird makes. Please visit the kiosk for more information on the Florida Scrub-Jay.

8) Tarflower - *Bejaria racemosa* -

This plant is named for the sticky sap present on the flower, whose function is to trap flies and other non-pollinator insects. It was once used as a natural flypaper by early settlers and is currently being researched as a flypaper for modern times. When the plant is in bloom, take a closer look at the flowers and see if you can find any unfortunate victims that might have been looking for an easy meal.



9. Sandy soil

The open patches of sand on either side of the trail might not be too impressive to you, but they are to the FL Scrub-Jay. These areas, created by fire, are where these birds **cache**, or store, their acorns to eat when insects are scarce. It has been estimated that each bird buries and harvests 6000 to 8000 acorns during August to November for use throughout the year. That's a lot of acorns!



10) Saw Palmetto - *Serenoa repens* -

This shrub comprises the majority of the understory in pine flatwoods ecosystems, and can be seen more sparsely distributed in scrubby flatwoods. Named for the saw-like teeth along its stem, it, like scrub oaks, has adapted to live in this harsh environment. In addition to having thick, waxy leaves, their vertical nature allows for less exposure to the hot noontime sun. The fibrous trunk helps protect it from fire, and it's one of the first plants to sprout back just days afterwards. More than 100 birds, 25 amphibians, 61 reptiles, 27 mammals, and hundreds of insect species use palmettos as food, cover, or for nest material. Black bears, white-tailed deer, raccoons, opossums, foxes, turkeys, quail, and gopher tortoises eat palmetto berries. Bears eat the "heart of palm", and new leaves. Gopher tortoises eat parts of the leaves. Florida Scrub-Jays, grasshopper sparrows, and turkeys collect fibers from the plant to use as nesting material. Panther, black bear, and white-tailed deer use the protected cover provided by palmettos as a birthing den. Spiders and wasps commonly build nests and webs in the fronds. The average growth rate of palmetto is about 1.2 cm per year. By measuring the visible part of the trunk, it's estimated that this plant is approximately 350 years old. This means it was sprouting just around the time that the Spanish were colonizing Florida in the 1600's.



11) Chapman's Oak - *Quercus chapmanii* -

Another scrub oak, the Chapman's oak looks similar to the Myrtle oak, but has a different leaf shape, and leaves that are not entirely all revolute. It's similar to the Myrtle oak in that it is critical in the survival of the FL Scrub-Jay.



Sheraton Scrub Natural Area is a 56 acre site made up of scrub and scrubby flatwood natural communities. The majority of the site covered by an understory of; myrtle oaks, saw palmetto, and a few scattered slash pine snags. A short, 20 minute walk will take you through the habitat of the Florida Scrub-Jay, a federally and state classified threatened species.

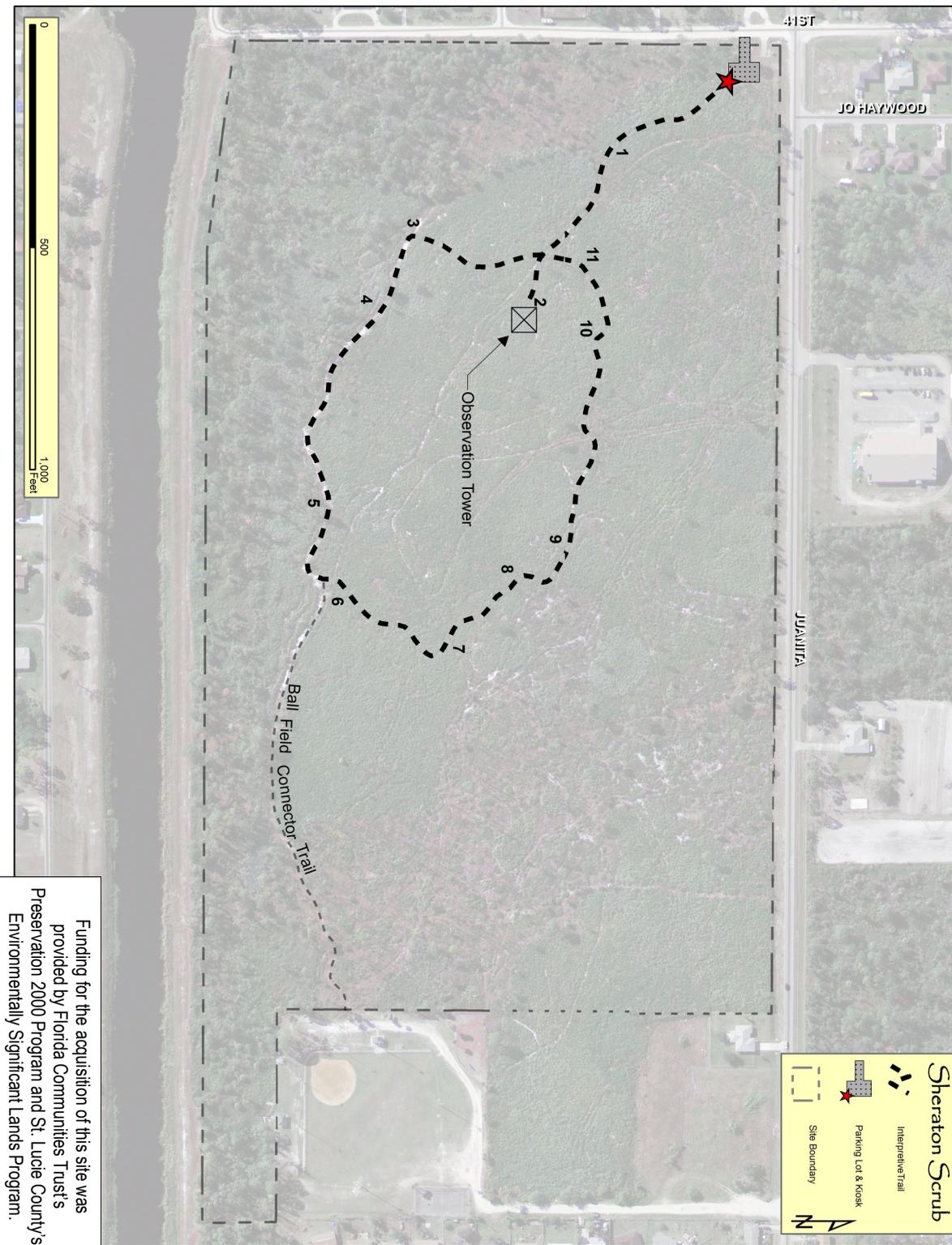
Scrub-Jays are commonly seen from the parking area, on the 1 mile interpretive trail, and from the observation tower. Binoculars are recommended.

The trail head and parking area is located on the corner of Juanita Avenue and 41st. in North Ft Pierce. Take 25th Street North from downtown Fort Pierce, take a left onto Juanita Ave. The parking area will be on the left hand side as you turn onto 41st St., adjacent to Sheraton Plaza

Guidelines and Safety Information:

- Be cautious of uneven trail surfaces
- Please remain on the trails.
- Carry adequate drinking water.
- In case of lightning, seek a low area away from trees, fence lines and tall objects.
- In case of emergency, call 911.
- While hiking the trail you may encounter animals indigenous to this area.
- Please observe from a safe distance.
- Leave all plant life intact.
- Please leave site cleaner than you found it. "Pack it in, pack it out."
- Use at own risk.

To learn more about St. Lucie County's natural heritage, there are more than 20 self-guiding interpretive trails located within the Natural Areas/Preserves. Each trail describes the most common plants, as well as significant geographical and historical features of the site.



Funding for the acquisition of this site was provided by Florida Communities Trust's Preservation 2000 Program and St. Lucie County's Environmentally Significant Lands Program.

Sheraton Scrub Preserve



Interpretive Trail



**St. Lucie County
Environmental Resources
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http://www.stlucieco.gov/erd/environmental_lands.htm
Site Open: Sunrise to Sunset (12/11)